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The New Radicals

Tim Paluch

Iowa State University

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the new radicals

Will the anti-war movement get off the ground or is it dead on arrival?

Story by Tim Paluch

Nick Wethington watched TV just like everyone else on Sept. 11. His reaction was natural — he got scared.

Scared at the thought that more attacks could certainly happen in America. Scared at how high the death toll would rise. But also scared that America would react to the violence with more violence. "I knew immediately the United States was not going to have a rational reaction to the attacks," says Wethington, sophomore in English.

That afternoon Wethington met with his friend Omar Tesdell, sophomore in journalism and mass communication, to discuss their concerns with the U.S. response. At 10:30 p.m., roughly 14 hours after the first plane hit the World Trade Center, nine students gathered in the Maple-Willow-Larch commons and formed "Time for Peace," an organization opposed to violent retaliation by the United States.

Within a week the organization had several campus demonstrations planned, including a "postcard-your-rep" rally.

The group holds weekly candlelight vigils where participants are handed makeshift luminaries — small candles in white plastic Dixie cups — and gather in a circle to discuss the week's events, debate issues and hold moments of silence for the victims of violence.

Time for Peace is not alone. Similar groups have popped up across the state since Sept. 11.

At the University of Iowa, Iowans for Peace are following a long-standing university wartime tradition. They have gathered for a silent vigil at the Pentacrest, a campus landmark, over the noon hour every day since Sept. 11.

At Grinnell College, the Grinnell Refugee Action Coalition is bringing two refugee families from Afghanistan to live in the town. The group will pay all their expenses.

But now is not the easiest time to be preaching peace.

This isn't the 1960s. This isn't the Vietnam War. This isn't an unpopular military campaign in a far-away nation no one's heard of, for a cause no one cares about. This isn't a time when America is begging the government to "bring the boys back

home." In fact, much of America wants to "send the boys on over." Overwhelming public support for the Bush administration and the "War on Terrorism" has barely wavered since the military response began in October, all but drowning out the dissenting voices of those calling for an end to the war.

Plain and simple, the general consensus is that war isn't just the best option — it's the only option. And that's making it hard to get a non-violent message out right now.

Glen Kuecker, coordinator of the conflict studies program at Depauw University in Greencastle, Ind., says it's a lot more difficult to be an advocate for non-violence after Sept. 11 because so many innocent civilians lost their lives on American soil. "This time around, peace is seen as appeasement or non-response," he says.

The strong sense of nationalism gripping the nation is causing many Americans to look at alternative opinions as treasonous or un-American. Those folks don't want to hear about Afghan refugees facing starvation because of the U.S. airstrikes. They want vengeance, and they want it right now.

"As soon as you say anything critical, you're anti-America or unpatriotic," Kuecker says. "As soon as you start saying, 'American actions in the past are questionable,' you're saying we deserved it."

Wethington says Time for Peace members have been told they should have been in the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, or that they deserve to be "buried in the sands of Afghanistan." The group's e-mail server was struck by a computer virus and frequently receives hate mail.

Mayra Madriz, a member of the Grinnell Refugee Action Coalition, says the public's lack of information is making "pro-war" and "American" synonymous. "People see it as a black-and-white issue. Either you support America and its military action in Afghanistan, or you are on the side of the terrorists," says Madriz, a junior in psychology from Venezuela. "People don't know enough about that region of the world and the United States' involvement there, and that's dangerous."

Brian Turner, a senior in history at Grinnell and an active anti-war advocate on campus, saw that "all-or-nothing" sentiment firsthand when he went home to Ohio for a weekend. He saw a sign that read "U.S.A. — love it or leave it," a common dismissal of Vietnam-era pacifists.

"That was disappointing," Turner says. "It's difficult for people to come forward with their alternative opinions because there is such a sensitivity to everyone's emotions."

One problem for the anti-war effort is there is no obvious alternative. "A lot of the criticism we receive has been people asking, 'If not violence, then what?'" Wethington says. "And we don't have all the answers. Time for Peace is about just searching for that answer."

Kathleen McQuillen, Iowa program coordinator for the American Friends Service Committee, an organization rooted in Quaker principles, says the alternative to war is not only halting military action but also eliminating the atmospheres that breed terrorists — poverty, seclusion and violence. "If there ever was a time that violence breeds violence is clear, this is it," she says. "We've got to get beyond the 'our.' Those children in Afghanistan are every bit as human as the children of the United States."

Can an effective anti-war movement flourish in a time of unheralded military support? Will dissenting voices on college campuses evolve into mainstream public opinion, or will the movements flicker in the background and not influence how the government handles the conflict?

Kuecker says the peace movement will pick up steam if America starts overextending itself. "The more we bomb and the longer this war drags out, the harder it will be for the Bush administration to maintain these high levels of support."

One veteran of the anti-war movement, 70-year-old Marian Solomon of Ames, has little doubt that the anti-war movement will eventually win public support. "The situation is very similar to Vietnam, where nonviolent dissent on college campuses changed the course of history," she says. Solomon has been involved in nonviolent activism since the 1950s, when she worked as a nurse with the Gandhian movement in India.

She is a regular at Time for Peace events. She says what the group is doing is important. "People need to hear that other option to war, the side that says violence only breeds more violence."

Only time will tell if the current crop of anti-war activists can achieve the success of its predecessors. Most show a blend of optimism and realism. They don't expect to change the world and stop the war right away, but that doesn't stop them from doing what they think is right.

"I can't just sit back and watch this war unfold and do nothing about it," Wethington says. "In 20 years I wouldn't want my kids to ask me, 'What did you do?' and have to tell them nothing."

Tim Paluch is a junior in journalism and mass communication. He is opinion editor for the Iowa State Daily.